



STATE OF HAWAII DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Facts About VX

What VX is

- VX is a man-made chemical classified as a nerve agent. Nerve agents are the most toxic and rapidly acting of the known chemical warfare agents. They are similar to pesticides (insect killers) called organophosphates in terms of how they work and what kinds of harmful effects they cause. However, nerve agents are much more potent than organophosphate pesticides.
- VX was originally developed in the United Kingdom in the early 1950s.
- VX is odorless and tasteless.
- VX is an oily liquid that is amber in color and very slow to evaporate. It evaporates about as slowly as motor oil.

Where VX is found and how it is used

- VX is not found naturally in the environment.
- Only known use for VX is as a chemical warfare agent.

How people can be exposed to VX

- Following release of VX into the air, people can be exposed through skin contact, eye contact, or inhalation (breathing in the VX mist).
- Though VX does not mix with water as easily as other nerve agents do, it could be released into water. Following release of VX into water, people can be exposed by drinking VX contaminated water or getting contaminated water on their skin.
- People can be exposed by eating VX contaminated food.
- VX is primarily a liquid exposure hazard, but if it is heated to very high temperatures, it can turn into small amounts of vapor (gas).
- A person's clothing can release VX for about 30 minutes after contact with VX vapor, which can lead to exposure of other people.
- VX breaks down slowly in the body, meaning that repeated exposures to VX and/or other nerve agents can have a cumulative effect (build up in the body).
- VX vapor is heavier than air, it will sink to low-lying areas and create a greater exposure hazard there.

How VX works

- The extent of poisoning caused by VX depends on the amount of VX to which a person was exposed, how the person was exposed, and the length of time of the exposure.
- Symptoms will appear within a few seconds after exposure to the vapor form of VX, and within a few minutes up to 18 hours after exposure to the liquid form.

- VX is the most potent of all nerve agents.
- It is possible that any visible VX liquid contact on the skin, unless washed off immediately, would be lethal.
- All the nerve agents cause toxic effects by preventing the proper operation of the chemical that acts as the body's "off switch" for glands and muscles. Without an "off switch," the glands and muscles are constantly being stimulated. Lung muscles may tire and no longer be able to sustain breathing function.
- VX is the least volatile of the nerve agents, which means that it is the slowest to evaporate from a liquid into a vapor. Therefore, VX is very persistent in the environment. Under average weather conditions, VX can last for days on objects that it has come in contact with. Under very cold conditions, VX can last for months.
- Because VX evaporates so slowly, surfaces contaminated with VX should therefore be considered a long-term hazard.

Immediate signs and symptoms of VX exposure

- People may not know they were exposed to VX because it has no odor.
- People exposed to a low or moderate dose of VX by inhalation, ingestion (swallowing), or skin absorption may experience some or all of the following symptoms within seconds to hours of exposure:
 - Runny nose
 - Watery eyes
 - Small, pinpoint pupils
 - Eye pain
 - Blurred vision
 - Drooling and excessive sweating
 - Cough
 - Chest tightness
 - Rapid breathing
 - Diarrhea
 - Increased urination
 - Confusion
 - Drowsiness
 - Weakness
 - Headache
 - Nausea, vomiting, and/or abdominal pain
 - Slow or fast heart rate
 - Abnormally low or high blood pressure
- Even a tiny drop of nerve agent on the skin can cause sweating and muscle twitching where the agent touched the skin.
- Exposure to a large dose of VX by any route may result in these additional health effects:
 - Loss of consciousness
 - Convulsions
 - Paralysis
 - Respiratory failure possibly leading to death

What the long-term health effects are

Mild or moderately exposed people usually recover completely. Severely exposed people are not likely to survive.

How people can protect themselves, and what they should do if they are exposed to VX

- Recovery from VX exposure is possible with treatment, but the antidotes available must be used quickly to be effective. Therefore, the best thing to do is avoid exposure:
 - Leave the area where the VX was released and get to fresh air. Quickly moving to an area where fresh air is available is highly effective in reducing the possibility of death from exposure to VX vapor.
 - If the VX release was outdoors, move away from the area where the VX was released. Go to the highest ground possible, because VX is heavier than air and will sink to low-lying areas.
 - If the VX release was indoors, get out of the building.
- If people think they may have been exposed, they should remove their clothing, rapidly wash their entire body with soap and water, and get medical care as quickly as possible.
 - *Removing and disposing of clothing:*
 - Quickly take off clothing that has liquid VX on it. Any clothing that has to be pulled over the head should be cut off the body. If possible, seal the clothing in a plastic bag. Then seal the first plastic bag in a second plastic bag. Removing and sealing the clothing in this way will help protect people from any chemicals that might be on their clothes.
 - If clothes were placed in plastic bags, inform either the local or state health department or emergency personnel upon their arrival. Do not handle the plastic bags.
 - If helping other people remove their clothing, try to avoid touching any contaminated areas, and remove the clothing as quickly as possible.
 - *Washing the body:*
 - As quickly as possible, wash any liquid VX from the skin with large amounts of soap and water. Washing with soap and water will help protect people from any chemicals on their bodies.
 - Rinse the eyes with water for 10 to 15 minutes if they are burning or if vision is blurred.
- If VX has been ingested (swallowed), do not induce vomiting or give fluids to drink.
- Seek medical attention right away. Dial 911 and explain what has happened.

How VX exposure is treated

- Treatment consists of removing VX from the body as soon as possible and providing supportive medical care in a hospital setting. Antidotes are available for VX. They are most useful if given as soon as possible after exposure.